**Discussion paper for Stakeholder Forum**

As part of the Government’s Action Plan for Jobs 2014, the Department of Education and Skills has committed to developing a foreign languages strategy. This will be mindful of the Language Education Policy Profile (2008) and of our need to “support Ireland’s “winning abroad” agenda”[[1]](#footnote-1), as well as other circumstances that have evolved globally and nationally over the last decade.

The intention is to develop a foreign languages strategy which covers post-primary, further and higher education. A consultation process and forum have already been held covering post-primary education. This document is intended to inform discussion at the stakeholder forum which will focus on issues of relevance to further education and training, higher education and employment. The paper will outline some of the context for the discussion, and outline both issues raised in the consultation process so far and other issues that may be needed to be discussed.

**Context**

Ireland in the twenty-first century finds itself in an increasingly globalised environment which can be perceived as both an opportunity and a threat. Our economic prosperity is dependent on gaining markets abroad, for example in regions as diverse as South America and the Far East. Achieving successful trade links in such markets requires that our citizens involved in trade have knowledge of the cultures, economies and languages of those countries. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs has identified, as a priority area, the skills needed to “trade internationally, including foreign languages and selling”. In the world of international business, where competence in English is increasingly taken for granted, it is companies with additional language capabilities and an understanding of local cultures that will enjoy competitive advantage in new markets.

Apart from these commercial considerations, competence in foreign languages facilitates greater mobility and enables Irish people to access and be enriched by the social and cultural life of other countries. Knowledge of languages, other than English and Irish, is essential for Ireland’s cultural, social and economic well-being. English may be a significant lingua franca of international communications, but our knowledge of English does not exempt us from learning other languages. In a changing, multicultural and multilingual Ireland, knowing and being aware of other languages is also important for social cohesion. Competence in a number of languages is a key skill that our citizens should be encouraged to achieve, particularly since Ireland has not only a national and European context, but also a global one. Our enhanced language diversity, predominantly due to the arrival of migrants from over 200 countries since 2000, is a social, cultural and national resource that should be nurtured and welcomed.

Irish citizens lag behind most of their European counterparts as regards foreign language competence. In 2012, Ireland was found to have one of the lowest percentages in Europe of citizens who were able to hold a conversation in at least one foreign language—40%, compared with an average of 54%.[[2]](#footnote-2) Only the UK, Portugal, Italy and Hungary scored lower. In the same study, however, Ireland was noted as having among the most “notable increases” over the period 2005 – 2012 in the proportion of people being able to have a conversation in one or two foreign languages. However it is worth noting that over this time period there was also increased migration into Ireland, and the presence of those who do not speak English as a mother tongue may have impacted on these figures.

**Further Education**

This has been a period of considerable change, consolidation and reform in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) have been established to deliver further education and training around the country. The ETBs are funded by a new body, SOLAS, who also provide co-ordination and strategic direction for the sector. SOLAS is required to develop a five year strategy for the provision of Further Education and Training. The Strategy, published in 2014[[3]](#footnote-3), sets out the future direction for FET to ensure the provision of 21st century high-quality further education and training programmes and services to learners, employees and employers.

The FET sector to date has, in general, developed without co-ordinated overall strategic direction across the education and training sectors. The new FET strategy should allow for much more effective co-ordinated action across sectors. The challenge for the delivery of foreign language learning opportunities is to ensure that provision is co-ordinated effectively across the sectors and that opportunities are available for learners within FET to access foreign language learning and accreditation, through the National Framework of Qualifications, in a way which is appropriate to their needs.

**Higher Education**

The higher education system plays a crucial role in the development of foreign language skills within Ireland and, more widely, in enhancing and developing understanding of language, literature and culture through teaching and research.

It is one of the core missions of the higher education system to meet the human capital and skills needs of the Irish economy. The *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014-2016* includes an indicator regarding alignment of international activities of higher education institutions with the national Trade, Tourism and Investment Strategy, including the number of graduates who have competence in the foreign languages of Ireland’s 27 priority trade, tourism and investment markets.

The higher education system also plays an important role in the education and training of graduates who go on to become foreign language teachers in the school system. To guarantee the quality of language teaching, Ireland continues to need teachers who are linguistically and pedagogically competent, who are highly motivated and who can communicate their enthusiasm for languages to young learners so that they in turn are motivated to become lifelong learners of languages.

Prospective students have access to a wide range of foreign language courses at higher education that can be taken as core subjects or in combination with a range of other disciplines across business, the arts, the humanities and the sciences. A number of higher education institutions also offer part-time or evening courses in a range of languages. The majority of language graduates come from the Universities sector.

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs’ 2012 report on *Key Skills for Enterprise to Trade Internationally* noted that some 3,400 students were registered on language programmes or other programmes with a significant language component – around 2-3% of the total cohort.

The Group noted that not all courses were identifiable in the data used for this report, particularly where languages were elective modules. Taking these other components into account, initial research undertaken by the Higher Education Authority suggested that up to 9,000 higher education students in total were studying a foreign language either as a single core subject or as an accredited part of a wide range of other undergraduate disciplines in 2012/13. Most students (around 6,000) were in universities, with around 1,500 in DIT and a similar number in the rest of the IoT sector.

Spending time overseas studying through a foreign language or in in-company placements can play an important role in languages learning. The majority of students studying overseas do so as part of the EU’s mobility programme, Erasmus+. The programme allows for students to spend a period abroad either studying at another European University or undertaking a work placement abroad. Around 2,700 Irish higher education students have undertaken outward Erasmus mobility in 2014. This is up over 90% on 2008 figures. The top 4 countries (France: 21%, Spain 18%, UK: 16%, Germany: 12%), account for over two-thirds of outward students.

A number of other HE programmes encompass some form of overseas study (e.g. in China), but no data is available on take-up of these modules.

**Employers**

Given the nature of Ireland’s open and globally-focused economy, foreign language skills are clearly of relevance to a range of businesses in Ireland, as outlined in the 2012 Forfás/EGFSN report, *Key Skills for Enterprise to Trade Internationally.* While almost 40% of trade is done with Anglophone countries, a lack of language skills may contribute to difficulty in breaking into newer markets. Of the “emerging and high potential markets” defined in the 2014 Review of the Trade, Tourism and Investment Strategy as those which have long-term potential for exports or where there are specific sectoral opportunities, none are Anglophone countries.

The recently published *National Employer Survey* showed that approximately one quarter of employers indicated that they had a specific requirement for foreign language proficiency skills in their organisation. The most popular languages were French, German and Spanish. After these languages, there were some differences in language requirements depending on ownership of the company –indigenous companies had a larger demand for Chinese whereas foreign owned companies had a greater requirement for Portuguese and Italian, which could reflect the fact that approximately 50% of exports from foreign employer organisations are to Europe.

The *EGFSN Vacancy Overview 2014* indicates that demand for languages was primarily in the associate professionals area (primarily sales positions), followed by sales and customer service, administrative roles and professional roles. German was the most prominent language mentioned, followed by French.

The *National Employers Survey* indicated that many employers that required languages require at least full professional proficiency in their graduate recruits. However, there were differences within the organisations depending on the languages required and the ownership of the companies. Foreign owned companies generally required a higher level of language competence, with 60% overall requiring full professional competence, whereas indigenous companies were less likely to require this level of competence (between 22% and 57% depending on the language).

However, IDA Ireland noted in 2012[[4]](#footnote-4) that “most companies seeking people with language skills are looking for native speakers or the equivalent.” This means that they seek to employ “foreign nationals who are already living in Ireland, Irish people living abroad, Irish people who have studied linguistics abroad, newcomers or a combination thereof”.

The *National Employer Survey* also indicated a lack of satisfaction with graduates in relation to language skills, with satisfaction rates of between 28% and 46% depending on size, type and ownership of companies.

A thematic working group of European member states has noted that “many employers… know neither how to identify and articulate language skills needs correctly nor how to deploy the existing skills of their employees effectively”, suggesting that there is a role for enterprise promotion agencies in addressing this issue[[5]](#footnote-5). Furthermore, a 2006 study showed that fewer than 1% of Irish companies had a language strategy, compared with 48% of companies across the EU[[6]](#footnote-6). The issue of identifying languages skills needs arises particularly in areas where native or professional language competence is not required, but lower levels of competence could be beneficial.

The nature of employer demand for foreign language skills has important implications for the education system, for graduates and employers.

Graduates who wish to obtain vacancies which require high-level language skills, will likely need to enhance their competence through immersion, for example by living, working or studying overseas. There could be particular opportunities for Irish citizens currently living overseas in areas whose language and culture are in demand in Ireland, for example parts of Europe, Asia and the Middle East. This is particularly the case where such graduates also have other in-demand disciplines such as engineering or ICT qualifications.

Employers may need to look at their own graduate recruitment and up-skilling policies to give opportunities for graduates with strong language skills the opportunity to further develop them to a higher standard. The development of language strategies within companies could also assist with this.

**Potential issues for discussion, including but not limited to issues raised in submissions**

**Teaching and Learning/Assessment and Qualifications**

Submissions to the consultation indicated that learner centred language learning is the key approach to take and that new methodologies must be used to equip learners for global, multi-modal communication. There should be a greater emphasis on spoken language, and greater cross-language collaborative approaches to pedagogy.

Methodologies which focus on cultural heritage and traditions and have an integrated approach to the teaching of languages, cultures and intercultural awareness should be promoted. The need to recognise international students as a linguistic resource who can engage in tandem learning was also stressed.

The use of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) was proposed in many of the submissions. CLIL refers to situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focussed aims, namely the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language.

The CEFR, is a guideline, with 6 benchmarks/standards, used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages, particularly across Europe and, increasingly, in other countries. The potential use of this framework was raised in the majority of submissions, although questions were raised about its relevance to non-European languages, and the use of other benchmarks in these areas.

In the context of being one of the implementing tools of the CEFR, portfolios were mentioned in many of the submissions. Portfolios, either paper-based or electronic can be used by students to demonstrate mastery of language or cultural skills when applying for jobs. The European Skills Passport, which is already in use in some areas, is an electronic portfolio which enables individuals to document their skills and qualifications including their language proficiency. In relation to encouraging the uptake of languages at third level, it was suggested that there be more widespread availability of third level language modules being accredited as part of degrees, and the possibilities for doing foreign languages as electives at third-level and in combination with other degree programmes should be broadened and promoted. Issues of funding and staffing were also brought up in the submissions.

*Questions:*

*What pedagogical approaches need to be taken in relation the teaching of students in Higher and Further Education Institutions?*

*What pedagogical approaches need to be taken in relation to the education of teachers of language?*

*Would increased use of the CEFR assist in understanding levels of proficiency and language competence among graduates? What are the practical implications of its use in Further and Higher Education?*

*Is immersion/time abroad a crucial element of learning? Are there ways to, for example, broaden participation in the Erasmus+ programme?*

*How practical would the use of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) be in Higher/Further Education?*

*Is there a place for extending the use of the European Skills Passport, or the development of languages-specific portfolio tools?*

**Awareness Raising**

Submissions raised the importance of a holistic approach to languages, and noted that if the strategy is limited mainly to the educational sector, then its success will be limited. The involvement of broader society and employers is also necessary for success.

In regard to Asian languages in particular, the submissions noted the global impact of the Asian region and the potential of Asian Studies/languages to expand minds and create employment. As such, it was suggested that it is important to normalise the study of Asian languages to increase uptake at all levels.

More broadly, a need has been noted for a broad awareness campaign in support of a national commitment to languages. This would need to have significant input from employers as well as the public sector and educational institutions. The example of the promotion of STEM was raised as a good example to follow, but it was stressed that raising awareness of the benefit of studying language should be complementary to STEM initiatives, and not in opposition.

*Questions:*

*What are the best ways for raising awareness of the need for languages, in HEIs, further education, with employers and with students?*

*In what ways could employers become more involved in awareness raising and the promotion of languages in the context of career opportunities in different sectors?*

*How can citizens benefit from improving their foreign language capability and cultural awareness in terms of their personal and societal development? How can continuing professional development and lifelong learning play a part in this?*

**Which languages and at which levels? The business/employment context.**

In relation to Further Education and Training, submissions suggested that SOLAS should encourage the development of specialised language training modules & methodology for teachers and trainers in FET and that languages should be given greater credit rating on Further Education courses to compensate for extra time involved.

More generally speaking, submissions raised the difficulty for the education system to second guess which languages would be most useful in the medium term.

Submissions stressed that heritage language speakers are extremely valuable in terms of national resources, and underlined the need to encourage and value them.

Submissions noted the low numbers of employers that state that they require a language, but noted that it would be short-sighted to focus only on the current needs of employers. In particular the issue of growing indigenous exports was raised, and that Ireland will only gain a competitive edge and successfully enter new markets with the help of other languages.

Some suggestions in the submissions included the establishment of business-education partnerships, and the establishment of awards for companies in recognition of outstanding multilingual performance. Work placements for students and graduates across the Further and Higher Education sectors was raised in submissions, particularly focusing on being placed in areas where they can use their language skills.

There was some indication in the submissions that the language focused courses in Springboard were positively received. However, in 2013 only 5 of the 13 proposed courses featuring languages were able to run, due to lack of demand.

18 courses with language components have been approved in the 2015 round of Springboard+, mainly with an emphasis on International Selling, and focusing on upskilling those who already demonstrate language competences. The success of these courses will be monitored.

*Questions:*

*What place does language learning have in further education and training? Is it appropriate to increase language learning at this level?*

*Is there a place for LSP (language for special purposes) or a vocationally-oriented approach? Would the use of CLIL* (Content and Language Integrated Learning) assist *here?*

*What types and levels of foreign languages proficiency and cultural awareness does Ireland need in order to support enterprises export growth; to meet demand arising within the domestic economy such as within tourism and hospitality, software localisation, international marketing and sales and to attract inward investment opportunities?*

*In addition to language proficiency and cultural awareness, what particular mix of skills do employers require?*

*What level of languages proficiency do employers need? Is there a place for intercultural knowledge as well as foreign language skills proficiency?*

*Would increased use of the* Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) *lead to better understanding of competence levels of graduates and therefore assist employers in selecting potential employees with language skills?*

*Assuming that there is a question of SMEs in particular “not knowing what they don’t know”, are there ways in which language skills can be promoted among employers? (e.g. through the use of internships?) Or is there research that can be done to quantify the missed opportunities arising from these cases?*

*Are there ways for employers to incentivise language learning both in recruitment processes and internal upskilling/opportunities?*

*Are there ways in which Enterprise Ireland could further assist companies in considering new markets in the non-English speaking world, and therefore increase their need for languages?*

1. Action Plan for Jobs 2014, p26 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. European Commission, *Europeans and Their Languages – Special Eurobarometer 386*, 2012, p. 15. (http://ec.europa.eu). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019,SOLAS (2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Evidence by Mr Barry O’Leary, CEO IDA Ireland to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, 17 July 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ET 2020 Thematic Working Group: Languages for Jobs – providing multilingual communication skills for the labour market [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. CILT National Centre for Languages (UK) (2006) *ELAN: Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)